

## **Reverend John Lathrop and the Founding Congregation of Barnstable: Persecution and Flight from England in the 1630's**

The Reverend John Lothrop was the spiritual leader of one of the first Congregational Churches in England. Since the only lawful church in England in that time was the Church of England, of which the King was the head, all other forms of worship were outlawed, and forced to meet in secret. In May 1632, Reverend Lothrop and 42 of his congregants were arrested and thrown into prison for meeting in a private home to hear him preach. As head of the Church of England, the King ordered such cases to be tried by the Royal Court of High Commission, which brutally suppressed such churches, and tried both ministers and followers in this inquisitional court. Defendants were denied the ordinary rights of English citizens, held without charges for long periods, were denied counsel, were required to sign an oath to incriminate themselves, and were subjected to cruel and unusual punishments. Ministers had to recant, leave the Realm or be executed. Many were tortured, and disfigured or died in prison.

On May 5, 1632 the prisoners were brought before the judges of the Court of High Commission, bishops all. As the court record reads, "This day were brought to the court out of prison diverse persons which were taken on Sunday last at a conventicle, met at the house of Barnet, a brewers clerk, dwelling in the precinct of Black Friars: By name, John Lothrop, their minister, Humphrey Barnard, Henry Dod, Samuel Eaton, William Granger, Sara Jones, Sara Jacob, Peninah Howes, Sara Barbon, Susan Wilson and diverse others."

Note: Under the Royal Law, a conventicle was defined as a "meeting to hear unlicensed preaching" and was therefore illegal.

The court record goes on with an opening address by The Archbishop of Canterbury, "You show yourselves to be unthankful to God, to the King and to the Church of England, that when, God be praised, through his Majesties care and ours that you have preaching in every church, and men have liberty to join in prayer and participation in the sacraments and have catechizing to enlighten you, you in an unthankful manner cast off all this yoke, and in private unlawfully assemble yourselves together making rents and divisions in the church---.You are desperately heretical."

The entire congregation refused to sign the oath and refused to testify against themselves. They were returned to prison where some died. Eventually, many were released, but Reverend Lothrop languished for two more years until he was released to care for his dying wife and his children. In June 1634 he and some 30 of his congregation left England for America, first settling in Scituate, then, in 1639, gaining a grant to settle at Barnstable. With him in the new settlement were some of his flock from London, including his son Thomas and family, Samuel Howes, brother to his wife Hannah Howes, his brother-in-law Robert Linnell and wife Peninah Howes Linnell, and James Cudworth, all identified from the church records. Although the records of Reverend Lothrop's London church are extensive, they are not complete. From other records, there may be additional Barnstable families that were a part of this persecuted congregation in London, including those of Cobb, Gilson, Rowley, Turner, Foster, Foxwell, and Annable. Others probably gathered to this famous minister in Barnstable because of his

reputation, including Isaac Robinson son of the leader of the Mayflower Pilgrims, who left Plymouth to join with him as soon as he reached America. He was considered by his contemporaries as one of the most important ministers to come to America. Many historians consider his church in London to be the first true Congregational Church in the world, and the daughter churches, the First Parish of Scituate and the West Barnstable Parish Church, to be the oldest continuous Congregational Churches. Reverend Lothrop and his followers are buried in the Lothrop Hill cemetery in Barnstable, forever together in congregation.